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ABSTRACT

Because rural Alaska educators were skeptical of the applicability to their teaching situations of various educational research results, researchers randomly surveyed rural Alaskan teachers to provide background information for the Rural Effective Schools Project and for educators who want to help rural schools increase their effectiveness. Three hundred four teachers (96% of those surveyed) responded by mail to questions about the use and effectiveness of teaching practices recommended nationally and for American Indian children, their preferred instructional methods, and their personal job satisfaction. In general, rural Alaskan teachers did not report frequent use of nationally recommended practices; rather, they used practices advocated in American Indian research literature such as hands-on and self-paced instruction. Only about half the teachers regularly assigned homework. Most expected their students to complete high school, but not to attend or complete college. Only about 40% felt their students' academic ability met or could be expected to meet national averages. For many teachers, academic progress represented a problem. Though satisfied with many aspects of their jobs, rural teachers reported frustrating relationships with district centers and little opportunity for professional growth. These findings have significant implications for the Rural Effective Schools Project. (SB)

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EFFECTIVE SCHOOLING IN RURAL ALASKA:

INFORMATION FOR THE RURAL EFFECTIVE SCHOOLS PROJECT

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July 1983

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We wish to express our appreciation to the many rural teachers who took the time to respond to this survey. We hope our report adequately represents teachers' viewpoints and concerns.

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RESEARCH SUMMARY

Background

Rural Alaska educators are skeptical about the applicability of national "effective schooling" research to culturally different village schools. The effective schooling research focuses on such matters as efficient use of classroom time, using standardized test scores to set academic priorities, and direct instruction to the class as a whole.

The Alaska Department of Education is planning to establish a rural Effective Schools Project in 1983. The Department is specifically concerned about the appropriateness of this research for rural Alaska and generally concerned with how to make the Effective Schools Project of value to rural education.

Purpose

In view of the controversy on effective schooling practices in rural Alaska, we added questions on this topic to a general survey of rural teachers. We asked teachers:

- how often they or their schools used the kinds of practices discussed in the national literature on effective schooling;
- how often they or their schools used instructional practices research has found to be especially effective with Native American children;
- what instructional methods they personally found most effective in their own communities; and
- how satisfied they were with students' academic progress, their own opportunities for professional growth, and other conditions of rural Alaska education.

Methods

We received surveys from 304 rural teachers. One teacher was randomly sampled from each school outside urban areas (such as Anchorage or Fairbanks). Response rate was 96 percent.

While the response rate was unusually high for a mailed survey, the limitations of questionnaires must be kept in mind in interpreting the results. We could not ask teachers in a survey how often they used many of the practices identified in the national literature on effective schooling; classroom observation would be required. In addition, standard measures of such concepts as "academic expectations" may not be applicable to rural Alaska.

Results

National Effective Schooling Practices

The majority of rural teachers do not often use national effective schooling practices. Fewer than half the teachers, for example, said that their schools often used standardized testing to set academic priorities or that their schools had found ways to schedule non-academic activities to limit disruption of instructional time.

Among teachers of junior high school students and above, about half regularly assigned homework. Rural teachers pointed out that many students did not have the lighting, space, or opportunity at home to complete homework. About a quarter of the teachers, however, overcame this problem by holding after-school study sessions twice a week or more. The classroom atmosphere, they felt, helps students get down to work and a teacher is available when students need assistance.

Teachers in all rural schools expected virtually all of their students to complete high school. The majority of teachers in Native majority schools, however, did not expect many students to attend or complete college, and they believed parents held similar views.

Only about 40 percent of teachers in Native majority schools felt that their students' academic ability was the same or higher than students' nationwide and that achievement at or above national norms could be expected of their students. In view of the isolation and different cultural background of many communities, teachers' views may be realistic. These results, however, underscore the problem of determining what "counts" as high academic expectations and reasonable standards for success in a village setting.

Effective Practices in Native American Education

While the national literature on effective schooling focuses on such issues as efficient use of time and standardized test scores, the research literature on Native American education has identified a different set of "effective" educational practices. These include, for example, use of Native teacher aides, self-paced instruction, and use of local examples to illustrate academic concepts. Most teachers in Native majority communities said they used these practices often.

When asked to describe the teaching practices they personally found effective, rural teachers emphasized those in the Native American research literature more often than those in the national effective schooling literature. Teachers emphasized the usefulness of such practices as 1) diverse instructional techniques, especially hands-on materials, 2) self-paced instruction, especially where the teachers set standards for how much work should be completed, 3) cooperative student learning, especially group projects and peer tutoring, and 4) involving parents and community people in the classroom.

Teacher Satisfaction with School Conditions

Most rural teachers are satisfied with their pay and benefits, teacher-student relationships, student discipline at their schools, and relationships between the school and the community. What frustrates many rural teachers is relationships with the district center, not relationships across cultures. About half the teachers in Native majority communities were dissatisfied or only somewhat satisfied with the district board's actions, the superintendent's management, and the support they receive from the central office. Many teachers are also dissatisfied with their own opportunities for professional growth.

Most rural teachers, especially more experienced teachers, are satisfied with the general quality of education at their schools. In Native majority communities, however, slightly over half the teachers were dissatisfied or only somewhat satisfied with their students' academic progress.

Implications

The focus of effective schooling projects in most states is academic progress. These results suggest that many rural teachers, particularly those in Native majority communities, see academic progress as a problem and will be receptive to this issue. Most rural teachers, especially experienced teachers, are satisfied with the general quality of education their schools offer. The Rural Effective Schools Project should avoid any negative implications about rural schools.

Most rural teachers, however, are unlikely to consider the national research on effective teaching helpful. When they consider what works in their own schools, they are likely to focus on practices emphasized in the research on Native American education. The Rural Effective Schools Project can point out that there is typically no conflict between the research on effective schooling and the research on Native American education.

In working with village schools, the Rural Effective Schools Project should be aware of the tensions that sometimes exist between the district center and the village schools and of the need to develop independent support for the project at both the central office and the individual school level. The project also needs to be aware of rural teachers' sensitivity to what rural parents want and to collaborate with parents as well as with teachers in any efforts to improve rural schools.

THE ISSUE

Rural Alaska educators are skeptical about the "effective schooling" practices summarized in the Governor's Task Force on Effective Schooling (1981). The Task Force attempted to identify, on the basis of national research, "effective schooling practices which would have general applicability to Alaskan students" (p.43).[1] The Alaska Department of Education (DOE) is using these findings to assist Alaska schools in designing their own improvement strategies. In 1982, DOE focused on urban schools; in 1983 DOE plans to begin a Rural Effective Schools Project.

Rural educators question whether the national findings on effective schooling--usually coming from large urban elementary schools--apply to the small Native multi-grade schools typical of rural Alaska. For example, national research on effective schooling shows that "children in the primary grades evidence higher achievement levels when they receive instruction in closely supervised, highly structured small group settings" (Governor's Task Force, p. 62). Direct instruction in small group settings is difficult to arrange in rural schools. The teacher must monitor children sometimes spanning five grade levels or more. A small group of students at the same grade level may not even exist. Self-paced individualized instruction, in the view of many rural teachers, is what works.

Is the national research literature irrelevant to the multi-grade classrooms of rural Alaska? Or do Native children also learn more from direct instruction in small groups rather than self-paced instruction where this situation can be arranged?

Rural teachers also question the national research literature on effective schooling because it does not take into account the specific cultural

characteristics and learning styles of Native American children. Indeed, a review of the research on Native American education has identified a different set of "effective" instructional practices (Cotton and Savard, 1981a). This set of practices does not typically contradict the findings of national research. It focuses, however, on other matters--the importance of warm, supportive teachers, Native American teachers and teacher aides, hands-on materials, and cooperative student projects.

PURPOSE OF REPORT

The purpose of this report is to provide background information for educators interested in finding ways to support rural schools in increasing their effectiveness.

We present the views of 304 randomly sampled rural Alaska teachers on effective instruction in their communities. We asked teachers:

1) how often they or their schools used the national effective schooling practices recommended in the Task Force Report;

2) how often they or their schools used the instructional practices research has found to be especially effective with Native American children;

3) what instructional practices they personally found most effective in their own communities; and

4) how satisfied they were with their students' academic progress, their own opportunities for professional growth and development, and other school conditions in rural Alaska.

METHODS

This teacher survey was part of a large study of school governance in rural Alaska conducted by Dr. Gerald McBeath at the University of Alaska with the assistance of Judith Kleinfeld, Bill McDiarmid, and others. In view of the controversy on effective schooling practices in rural Alaska, we added questions on this topic to a general survey of rural teachers.

The Sample

We mailed the survey in the spring of 1982 to one randomly selected teacher from each rural Alaska school (N = 315). (We defined "rural" as schools outside urban areas, such as Anchorage, Fairbanks, Juneau, and Kenai.) The response rate was extremely high—96 percent of the rural teachers answered our questions. Most teachers answered the questions carefully; indeed, many wrote notes in the margins to clarify their views.

The total sample—304 rural Alaska teachers--is unusually large and representative of rural schools. Since we sampled one teacher from each rural school (not rural teachers in general) the sample includes large numbers of teachers from small, multi-grade schools.

Limitations of a Survey

In asking teachers about their own instructional practices or those commonly used at their school, we faced a problem. Some of the most important instructional practices identified in the national literature cannot be measured through a survey.

Study after study, for example, has found that in some classrooms students spend most of their time doing academic tasks. In others, classwork is constantly interrupted because the teacher stops to discipline students, pass out materials, or attend to administrative details. "Time on task" is strongly related to gains in achievement on standardized tests (see review by Cotton and Savard, 1981b).

A mailed survey, however, cannot be used to measure how much time rural Alaska students spend doing academic work. Most teachers could not say with any accuracy how many minutes a day their students are on task. Classroom observation--extremely expensive and time-consuming in remote rural schools--would be required. What we could ask teachers in a mailed survey is a related question--whether their school has found a way to limit the interruptions common in rural schools, for example, basketball games, medical and dental exams, student trips, and the like.

In short, we could not ask rural teachers about every effective instructional practice discussed in the Task Force Report. We did ask about those practices which teachers could report on in a mailed survey.

Data Analysis

We analyzed teachers' reports by many categories--whether the school was Native majority (80 percent or more), white majority (80 percent or more), or of mixed ethnicity; whether the school was REAA, BIA, city or borough; whether the school was large or small; and the number of years experience the teacher had in the community or in rural Alaska education.

In presenting the results, we use the categories where statistically significant differences most frequently occurred. In the case of the principal's instructional role, for example, the greatest differences occurred in schools of

different size. In the case of teachers' expectations about whether or not their students would attend college, the greatest differences occurred between Native and white majority communities. Where no substantial differences occur, we present results for all rural teachers.

FINDINGS

Use of National Effective Schooling Practices

National research suggests that the following practices are strongly and consistently related to student achievement (Governor's Task Force, 1981). We asked rural Alaska teachers how often they used them:

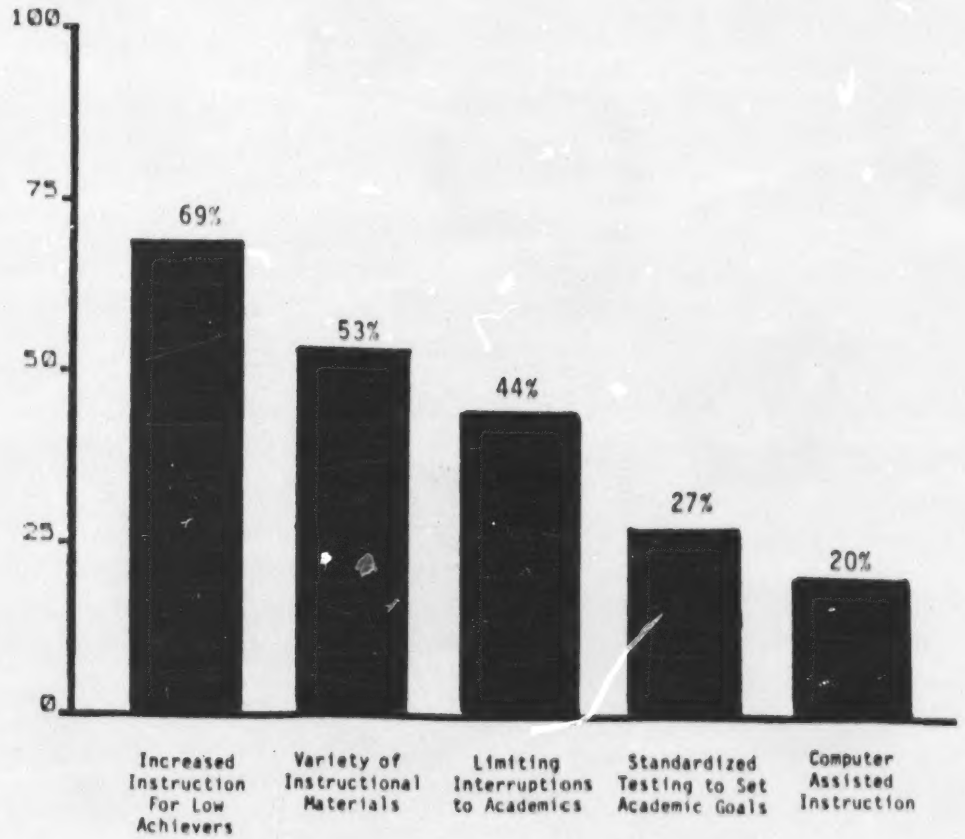
- Allocating additional instructional time for low ability, low-achieving students (including Title I and other programs).
- Using computer-assisted instruction to supplement regular teaching.
- Using standardized test scores to set academic priorities and objectives.
- Using diverse instructional materials including kits, mock-ups, modules and hands-on projects.
- Scheduling non-academic activities to limit disruption of instructional time.

Of these five practices, the only one used in most schools (69 percent) was increasing instructional time with low achieving students (Table I). Federally funded Title I programs probably account for the frequency of this practice. About half the teachers (53 percent) said they used a variety of instructional materials. But less than half said that the school attempted to schedule non-academic activities outside classtime, that computers were used on a regular basis,[2] or that the school paid attention to standardized test scores in setting academic goals and priorities. Most teachers said that their schools used these practices "somewhat" but not "often."

TABLE 1

NATIONAL EFFECTIVE TEACHING PRACTICES

TEACHERS USING PRACTICE OFTEN:
ALL RURAL SCHOOLS



SOURCE: McBeath, G., Kleinfeld, J., McDiarmid, G., and Coon, D. A Statewide Survey of Rural Alaska School Teachers, Fairbanks, AK: Center for Cross-Cultural Studies, University of Alaska, 1982.

We found very little difference in the use of these practices in schools of different size or of different ethnic composition. Since BIA schools are being phased out in rural Alaska, it is interesting, however, that these were the schools most likely to use some of these practices. BIA schools were significantly more likely to use standardized test scores to set academic goals and priorities (50 percent) and to schedule non-academic activities so they did not interrupt classwork (62 percent). We do not know why this is the case. Possibly these results indicate the narrower academic emphasis of the BIA—an older and more traditional school system.

Homework

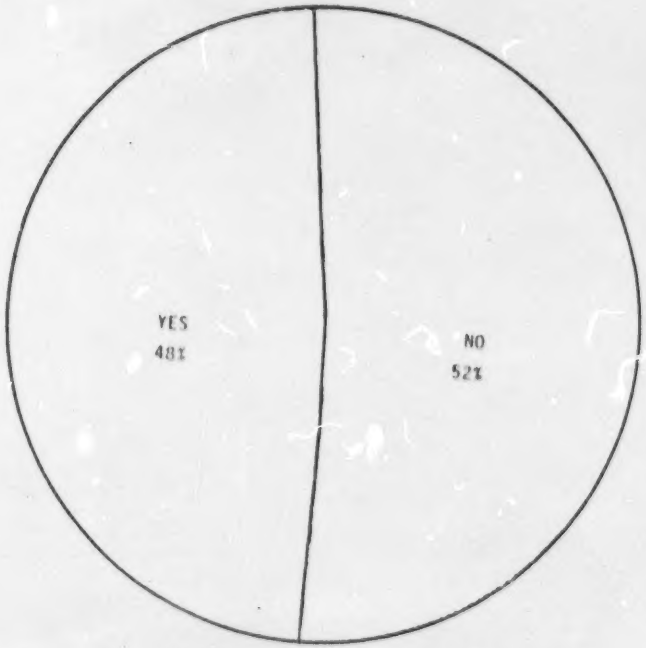
Another instructional practice related to student achievement in national research is regularly assigning homework (Coleman, Hoffer, and Kilgore, 1982). In rural Alaska many teachers find whether or not to give homework a troublesome issue. As some teachers explained in the margins of the survey, students may not have the lighting, space, or opportunity at home to complete homework. (One teacher in a traditional Eskimo community wrote that the "school board requested that students not be given homework.")

In view of these circumstances, we asked rural teachers whether they regularly assigned homework to their students. Slightly less than half (48 percent) said they did (Table 2). Some of these teachers, of course, teach in the early elementary grades where homework is not conventional. When we consider only teachers of junior high and high school students, the proportion of teachers who assign homework increases but only slightly (55 percent).

Some rural teachers, aware that students find it difficult to do homework at home, hold before or after school study sessions where students can do homework. The classroom atmosphere, they argue, helps students get

TABLE 2

HOMEWORK AND AFTER-SCHOOL STUDY SESSIONS:
ALL RURAL SCHOOLS



PROPORTION OF RURAL TEACHERS WHO
REGULARLY ASSIGN HOMEWORK

PROPORTION OF RURAL TEACHERS WHO
HOLD FORMAL BEFORE OR AFTER SCHOOL
STUDY SESSIONS

SOURCE: McBeath, G., Kleinfeld, J., McDiarmid, G., and Coon, D. A Statewide Survey of Rural Alaska School Teachers, Fairbanks, AK: Center for Cross-Cultural Studies, University of Alaska, 1982.

down to work and the teacher is there when the students need help. About a quarter of the rural teachers we surveyed held such study sessions as often as twice a week and another 15 percent held them once a week (Table 2). Teachers of junior high and high school students held after school study sessions no more frequently than other teachers.

More experienced rural teachers are more likely to hold after school study sessions. For example, only about 20 percent of teachers in Native communities with one to four years' experience held after school study sessions; among teachers with five or more years' experience 46 percent held such sessions ($p < .06$).

Teacher Expectations

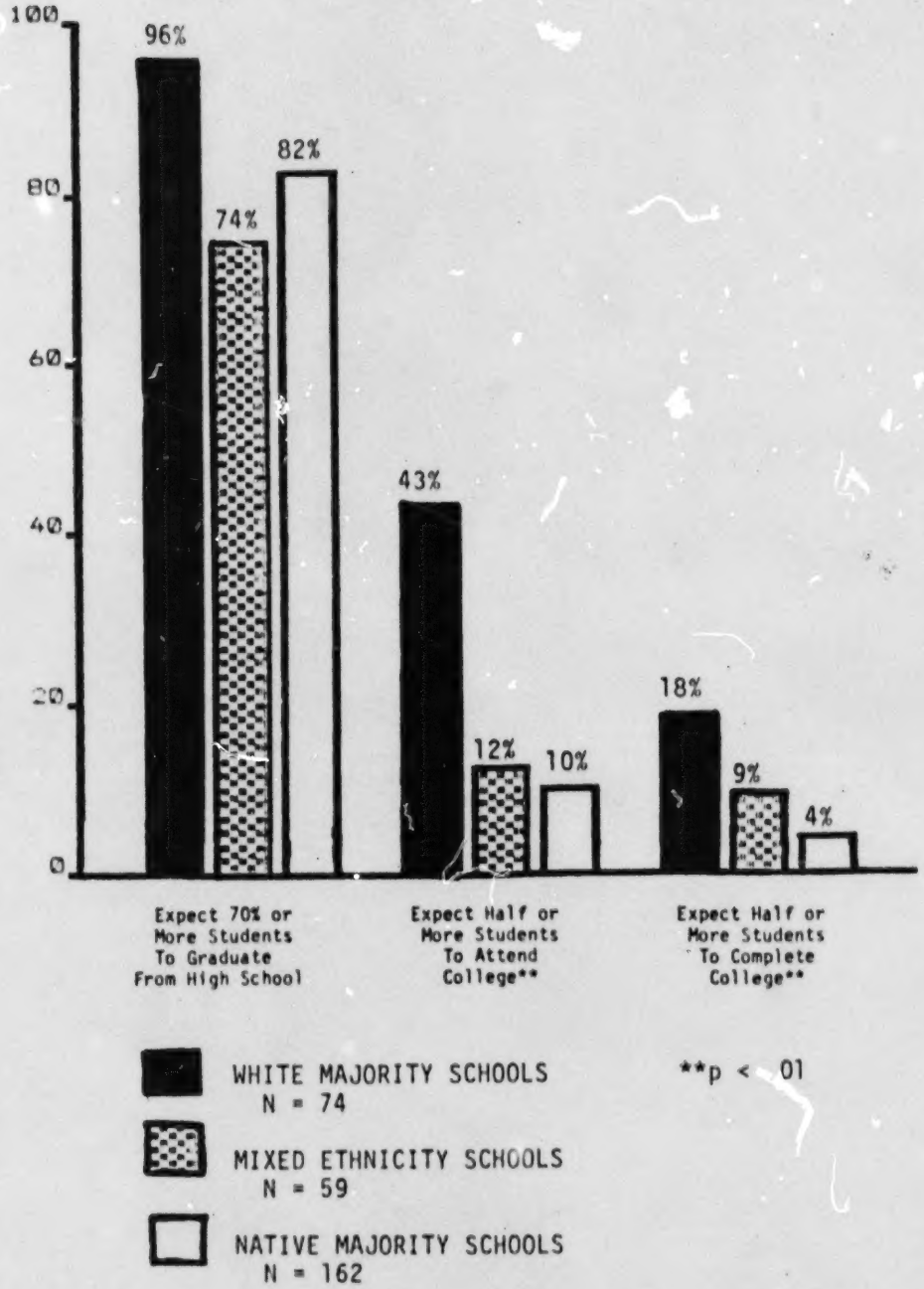
In the national literature on effective schooling, holding high expectations for student achievement has been found to be a critical characteristic of effective teachers (see especially Brookover, 1979). Typically expectations are measured by asking teachers such questions as what proportion of their students they expect to complete high school and attend college, how they would compare the ability of their students to students nationally, and whether they feel their students can be expected to achieve at national norms.[3]

Rural teachers, whether their students are mostly Native or mostly white, expect the majority of their students to complete high school (Table 3). Teachers in Native majority schools, however, are significantly less likely to expect students to attend and complete college than teachers in white majority schools (Table 3).

Rural teachers' own views about college for their students are consistent with what they think parents want for their children. In Native

TABLE 3

RURAL TEACHERS' EXPECTATIONS ABOUT
HIGH SCHOOL AND COLLEGE COMPETITION:
WHITE MAJORITY, MIXED, AND NATIVE MAJORITY SCHOOLS



SOURCE: McBeath, G., Kleinfeld, J., McDiarmid, G., and Coon, D. A Statewide Survey of Rural Alaska School Teachers, Fairbanks, AK: Center for Cross-Cultural Studies, University of Alaska, 1982.

majority communities, 49 percent of the teachers said that none of the parents expected students to complete college. In white majority communities, the same proportion of teachers believed that parents expected half or more students to complete college.

We did not survey parents in either Native or white communities, and we do not know if teachers' perceptions are correct or incorrect. Teachers' comments in the margins of the surveys, however, suggest their concern about parents' support for what they are trying to do in school:

> "It gets very depressing to a teacher. You really get tired of playing the heavy and being the only (most of the time) negative influence on their life. By negative I mean that you try to enforce some kind of discipline or rules."

> "Parents are reluctant to see their children leave home and become indoctrinated in a foreign culture."

> "If the parents would support the teacher we would have much greater success."

When we asked rural teachers about the level of academic achievement they could expect of their students, there were again wide differences between Native majority schools and white majority schools. About 60 percent of rural teachers in Native majority communities felt that the academic ability of their students was lower than that of students nationally (Table 4). Sixty percent also felt that their students could not be expected to achieve at national norms (Table 5). Similarly, only slightly more than half the teachers in Native majority communities felt their schools could be better than average (Table 6).

TABLE 4

RURAL TEACHERS' VIEWS OF THEIR STUDENTS' ACADEMIC ABILITY
COMPARED TO STUDENTS NATIONWIDE:
NATIVE MAJORITY SCHOOLS AND WHITE MAJORITY SCHOOLS

NATIVE MAJORITY SCHOOLS**
N = 162

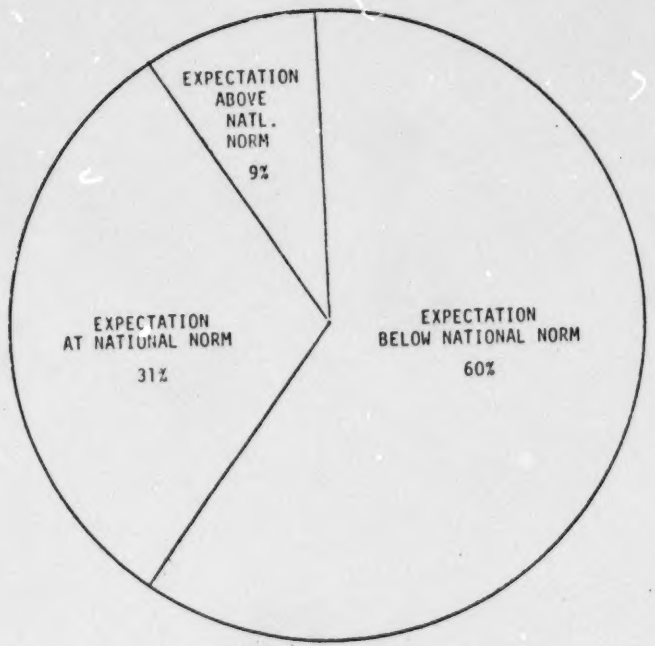
WHITE MAJORITY SCHOOLS**
N = 74

**p < .01

SOURCE: McBeath, G., Kleinfeld, J., McDiarmid, G., and Coon, D. A Statewide Survey of Rural Alaska School Teachers, Fairbanks, AK: Center for Cross-Cultural Studies, University of Alaska, 1982.

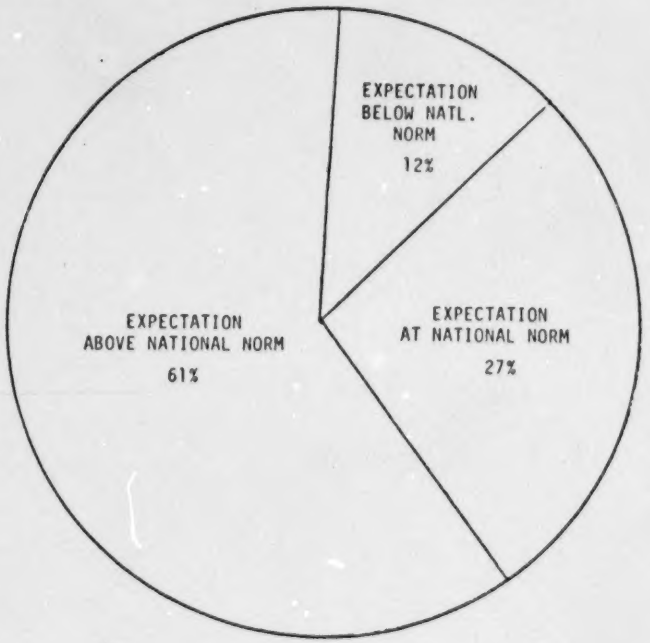
TABLE 5

RURAL TEACHERS' VIEWS ON THE ACHIEVEMENT LEVEL
THAT CAN BE EXPECTED OF THEIR STUDENTS:
NATIVE MAJORITY SCHOOLS AND WHITE MAJORITY SCHOOLS



NATIVE MAJORITY SCHOOLS **

N = 162



WHITE MAJORITY SCHOOLS **

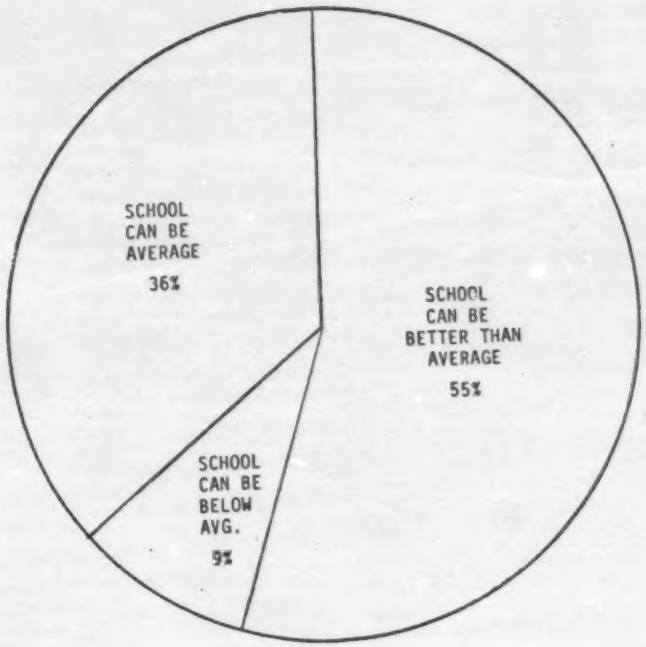
N = 74

**p < .01

SOURCE: McBeath, G., Kleinfeld, J., McDiarmid, G., and Coon, D. A Statewide Survey of Rural Alaska School Teachers, Fairbanks, AK: Center for Cross-Cultural Studies, University of Alaska, 1982.

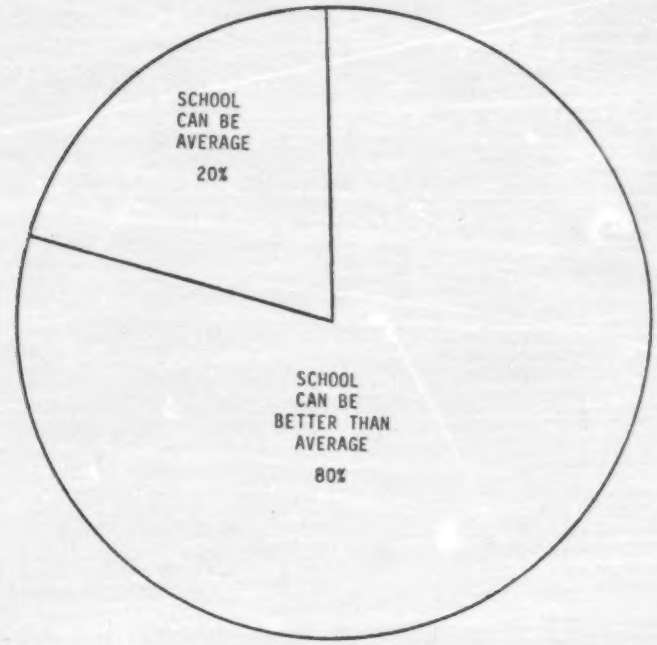
TABLE 6

RURAL TEACHERS' VIEWS ON HOW GOOD A SCHOOL
THEIR SCHOOL CAN BE:
NATIVE MAJORITY SCHOOLS AND WHITE MAJORITY SCHOOLS



NATIVE MAJORITY SCHOOLS**

N = 162



WHITE MAJORITY SCHOOLS**

N = 74

** $p < .01$

SOURCE: McBeath, G., Kleinfeld, J., McDiarmid, G., and Coon, D. A Statewide Survey of Rural Alaska School Teachers, Fairbanks, AK: Center for Cross-Cultural Studies, University of Alaska, 1982.

It is difficult to know how to interpret these results. One view is that rural teachers are simply being realistic. They are aware that their students have grown up in isolated, culturally different communities and that for many standard English is a second language. They know that in fact most students score below national norms. It would be unreasonable to expect their students to do as well as students nationally. Indeed, several teachers wrote on their surveys that we should be careful NOT to interpret their responses as "low expectations."

While we were inclined to accept this view, it is still troubling that so many rural teachers do not expect their students to achieve at national norms. A national norm, after all, is an average of children from the inner city and rural Mississippi as well as from Scarsdale. The issue of how to set reasonable standards, of what kinds of academic performance should count as success, is a vexing one in rural education.

Use of Native American Effective Teaching Practices

In a review of the research literature on Native American education, Cotton and Savard (1981a) identified instructional practices especially effective with Indian and Eskimo students. These practices are quite different from those identified in the national literature on effective schooling. They emphasize localized instruction rather than efficient use of time. The practices include:

- Use of Native teacher aides
- Self-paced instruction
- Cooperative student learning situations (such as peer teaching and group projects)
- Use of local curriculum materials (such as legends)
- Use of local examples to illustrate academic concepts

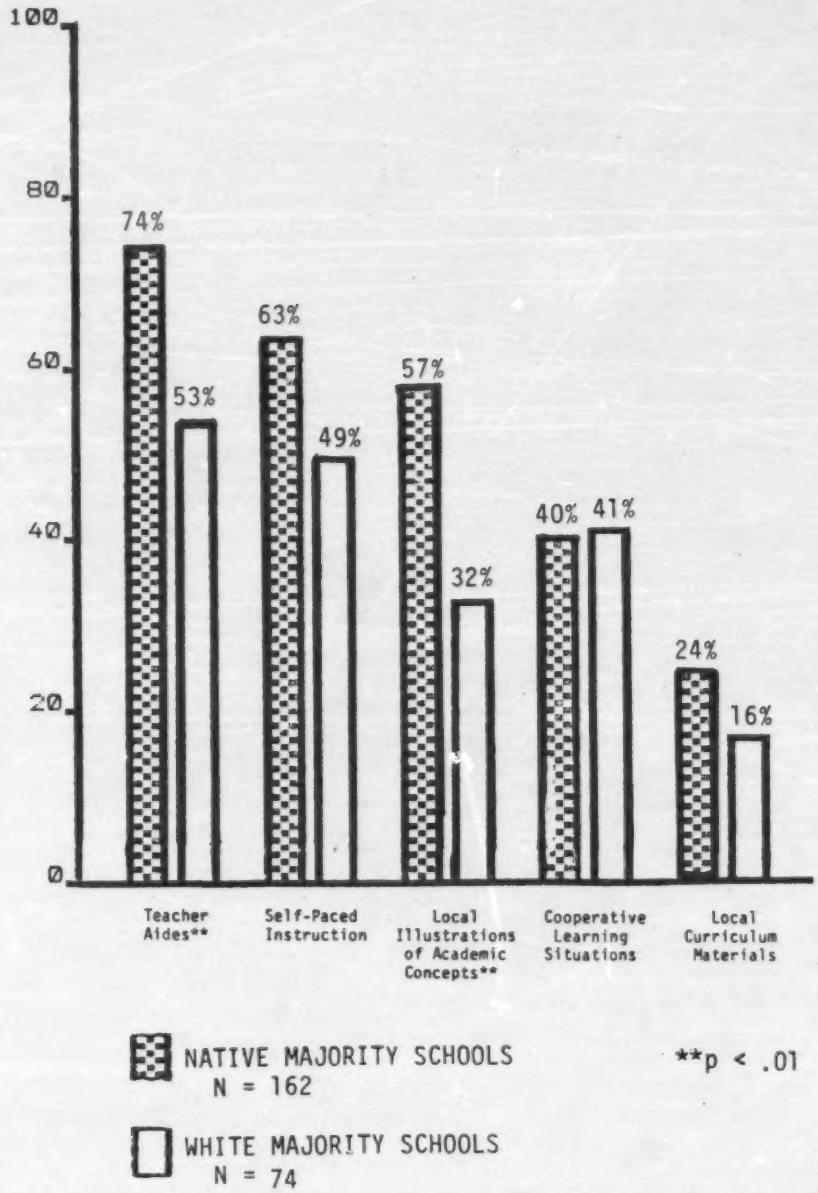
The practices listed above, however, are not supported by a substantial body of well-designed research. In general, research on Native American education is scarce. Such practices as "time on task" have not been systematically examined with Native Americans.

We found that rural teachers in Native majority schools used the practices linked to effective teaching of Native American students fairly often (Table 7). Almost three-fourths of the teachers, for example, said their schools often used teacher aides. More than half the teachers frequently used self-paced instruction and relied on local examples to explain academic concepts. More experienced teachers were especially likely to use these practices. For example, 44 percent of teachers with five or more years experience in the community often used local curriculum materials; among teachers with two to four years experience, 17 percent often used local

TABLE 7

USE OF INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES RESEARCH HAS FOUND ESPECIALLY EFFECTIVE WITH NATIVE AMERICAN STUDENTS: NATIVE MAJORITY SCHOOLS AND WHITE MAJORITY SCHOOLS

USE PRACTICE OFTEN



SOURCE: McBeath, G., Kleinfeld, J., McDiarmid, G., and Coon, D. A Statewide Survey of Rural Alaska School Teachers, Fairbanks, AK: Center for Cross-Cultural Studies, University of Alaska, 1982.

materials ($p < .04$). More experienced teachers were significantly more likely to use local examples to illustrate academic concepts. They were somewhat more likely (the trends did not quite reach conventional levels of statistical significance) to use self-paced instruction and cooperative student learning situations.

Instructional Practices Rural Alaska Teachers See as Highly Effective in Their Communities

We asked rural teachers to describe briefly the instructional practices they found particularly effective in their own communities. Each of the following practices were mentioned by about 20 percent of the teachers (a fairly large group considering the wide variety of practices teachers mentioned):

1. Use of diverse instructional materials, especially hands-on materials.

> "Any type of hands-on class seems to be a better motivator than a purely academic program. Arts, music, small engines, skin sewing, etc."
>
> "Hands-on projects that are pertinent and meaningful to everyday life."
>
> "Hands-on projects have shown the most knowledge gains."

2. Self-Paced Instruction, especially when the teachers sets some standards for the amount of work to be completed.

> "Self-paced with guidelines (such as at least five pages in math done by Friday; they can go faster but have to meet the minimum requirements)."
>
> "As I have only ten students in a one room school, self-paced (and teacher-paced) instruction works well. I find group activities hard to plan because of the grade level spread."

3. Cooperative Student Learning, especially group projects and peer tutoring.

> "Group assignments are very effective."
>
> "In a multi-grade classroom, the older students make wonderful teachers for the younger students."
>
> "Group projects such as a weekly school-community newspaper."

4. Involving Parents and Community People in the Classroom.

> "Sending home nightly study guides for the family to work on that day's reading vocabulary and word skills." (majority white community)
>
> "Retired community people with special talents and interests." (majority white community)

When asked to describe the teaching practices they saw as effective, few rural teachers mentioned any of the practices discussed in the national literature on effective schooling.[4] The exception was the use of diverse instructional materials and here rural Alaska teachers added a different emphasis--the importance of hands-on materials.

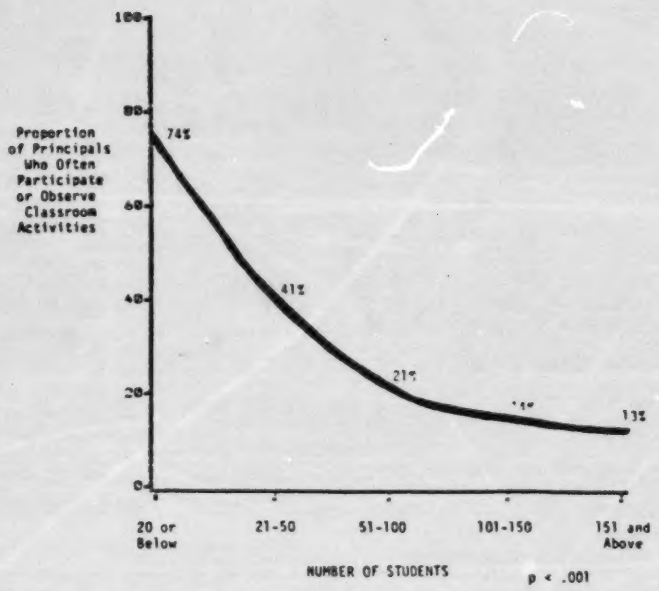
Rural Principals' Instructional Role

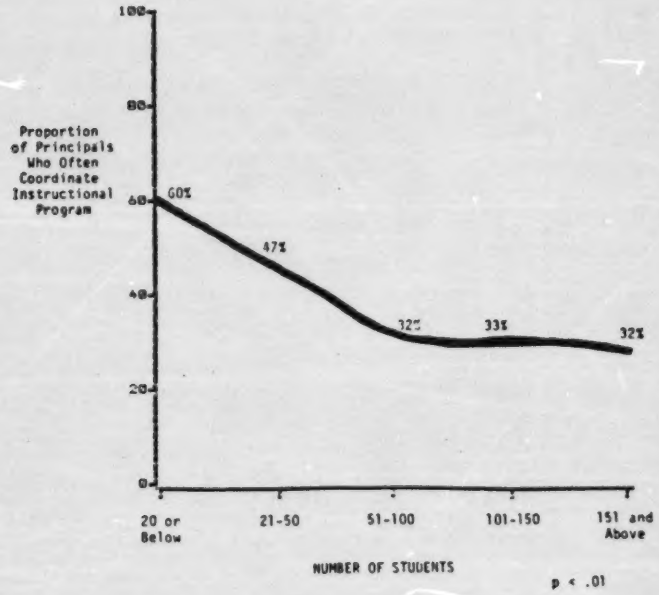
The national literature on effective schooling suggests that the achievement of low-income children goes up when the building principal takes on the role of instructional leader and focuses staff and student energy on raising achievement levels (Cotton and Savard, 1981c).

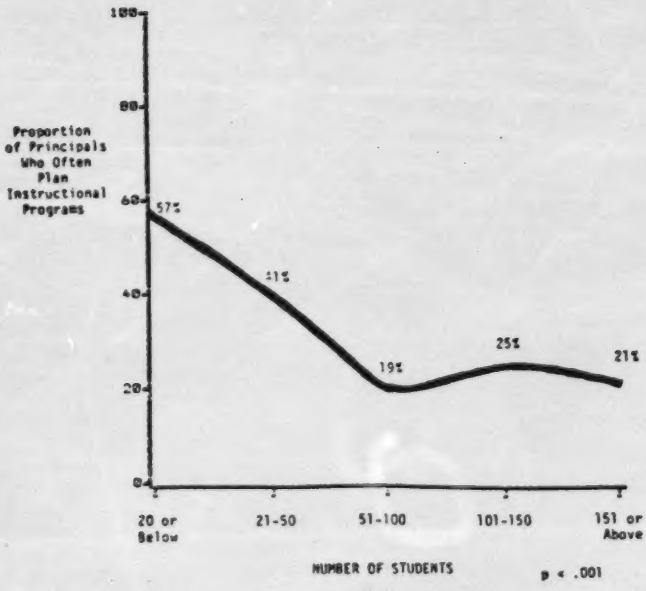
Principals in Alaska rural schools, especially smaller schools, already participate to a great extent in the business of teaching (Table 8). The role of the principal is strongly related to the size of the school. In very small schools, almost three-fourths of the principals are also classroom teachers. In schools of 50 students or below, about half the principals often plan, coordinate, and evaluate instruction.

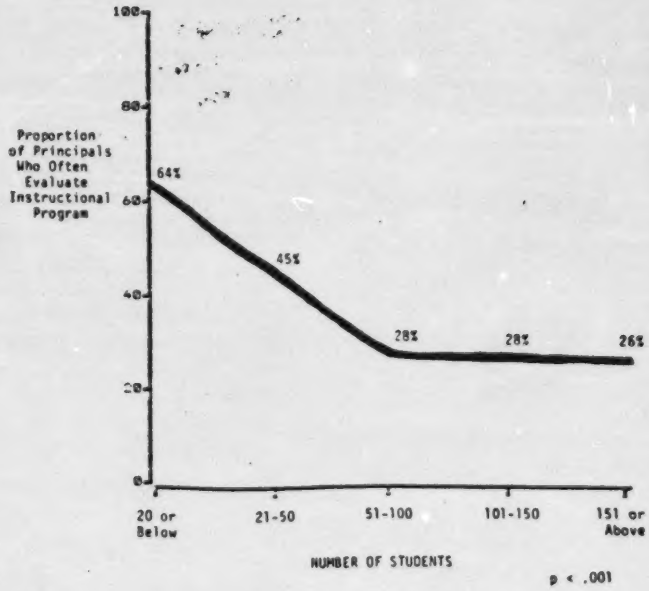
TABLE 8

THE PRINCIPAL AS INSTRUCTIONAL LEADER:
ALL RURAL SCHOOLS









SOURCE: McBeath, G., Kleinfeld, J., McDiarmid, G., and Coon, D. A Statewide Survey of Rural Alaska School Teachers, Fairbanks, AK: Center for Cross-Cultural Studies, University of Alaska, 1982.

Rural Teachers' Satisfaction With School Management and Working Conditions

Reading through 304 teacher surveys, many marked with marginal comments, was a disheartening experience. The teachers' dominant mood was frustration. Occasionally, a teacher would voice satisfaction:

> "This is a great place to be, challenging students, helpful parents, and a cooperative district. We love it here so I don't know when we'll leave."

But the majority of the notes in the margins were complaints. Many teachers were depressed and dissatisfied, even though the majority (78 percent) thought they were personally successful as rural teachers.

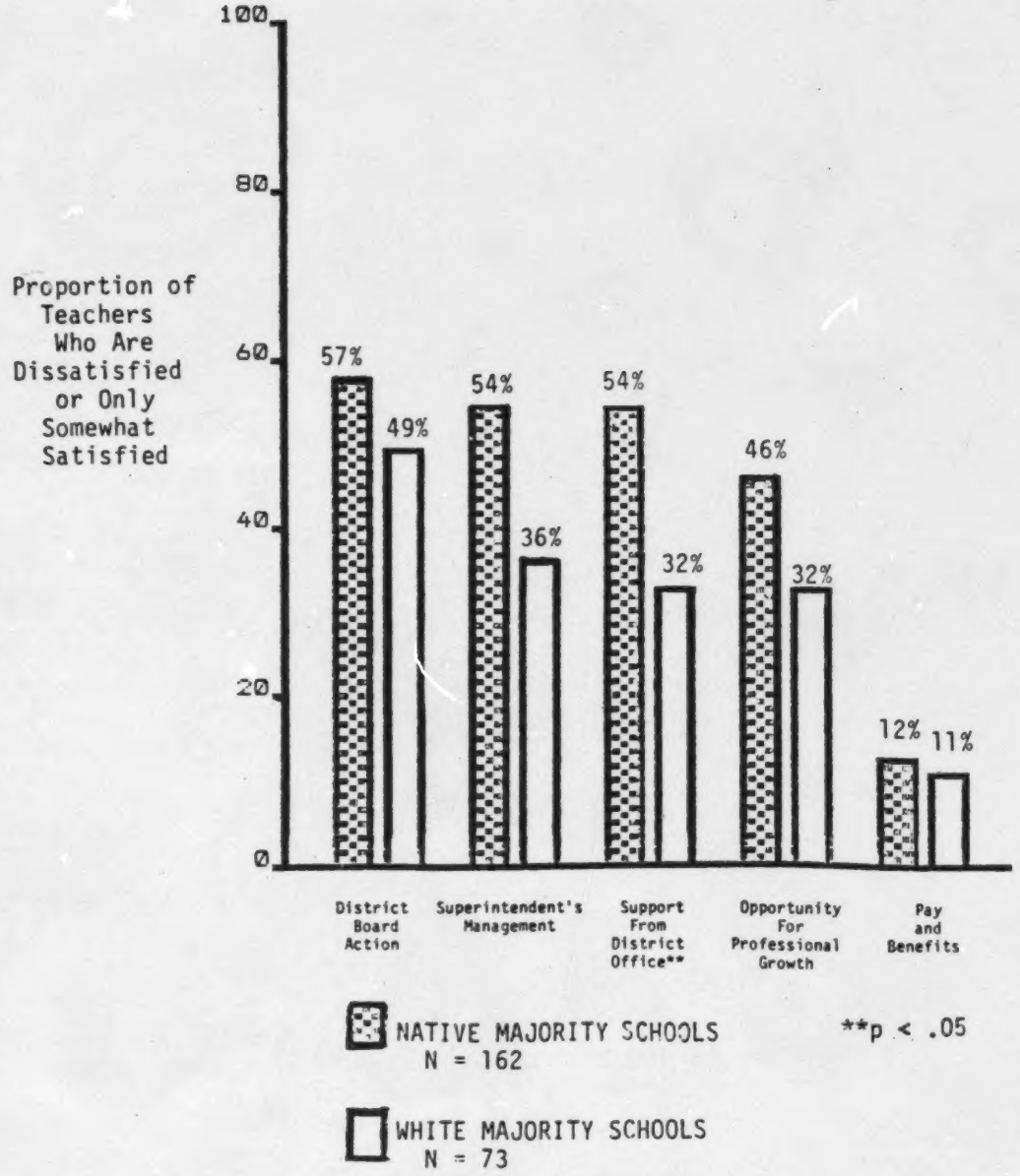
We asked teachers what they were satisfied and dissatisfied about—pay and benefits, housing, relationships with the students and with the community, district office management, students' academic progress, and so on. The results surprised us.

The majority of teachers were not concerned about the standard issues discussed in contract negotiations or legislative reports or the academic literature. Most teachers (88 percent) were satisfied with their pay and benefits (Table 9). Housing was an acute problem for some (about a third), but not for most. Nor did teachers find it difficult to develop good relationships with the culturally different students they taught. Indeed most teachers (93 percent) saw their relationships with students as a major source of satisfaction.

What frustrated teachers most was not relationships with different cultures but relationships with the district office. More than half the teachers in Native majority communities were dissatisfied or only somewhat satisfied

TABLE 9

TEACHER SATISFACTION WITH SCHOOL MANAGEMENT
AND WORKING CONDITIONS:
NATIVE MAJORITY SCHOOLS AND WHITE MAJORITY SCHOOLS



SOURCE: McBeath, G., Kleinfeld, J., McDiarmid, G., and Coon, D. A Statewide Survey of Rural Alaska School Teachers, Fairbanks, AK: Center for Cross-Cultural Studies, University of Alaska, 1982.

with the district school board, the superintendent's management, and the support they received from the district office.

Several teachers commented on the margins of their survey, for example, that the school near the central office received an unfair share of equipment. Some teachers in remote schools said that the "superintendent never has been here to make a visit" and that the district office "too frequently forgets the village schools." Others felt that the district staff did not support them and did not understand their situation:

> "Many problems that face rural schools are self-inflicted—usually from the central office. Administrators who have never worked or lived in rural Alaska often make decisions that do not fit village life or needs."

These types of tensions are common between any "center" and its "periphery", whether it is a corporate headquarters and its remote offices, a city and its countryside, or the district office and its village schools. The central office perspective is, of course, quite different. Central office staff see themselves as having many schools to visit, many programs to administer, many grant applications and reports to write. The point of interest to the rural Effective Schools Project is the existence of such tensions and the need to develop a strategy for change that is supported by both the central office and the village schools.

Another area where a large proportion of teachers were dissatisfied was with their own opportunities for professional growth. In Native majority communities, 46 percent of the teachers mentioned this area (Table 9). One teacher wrote on her survey:

> "I am in a tiny school—one other teacher not my husband. I have no one to ask questions of. My class of primary grade children includes an incredible range of students (skill, intelligence, behavior, motivation). I have an unworkable curriculum guide which presents me with ample materials to use with each grade--three--and each subject--eight—but no advice at all for my class. My district has offered me one training session, one week. I am alone!"

Rural teachers see the lack of opportunities, for example, to talk over their teaching problems with other professionals as one of the serious problems of village teaching. Professional exchanges in an isolated village school are difficult. The teaching staff itself is small and few instructors teach similar grade levels or subjects. The teacher can't talk shop with someone else, for example, who is struggling with how to teach high school English. In addition, interpersonal tensions can develop between rural teachers at the same school. Unlike urban teachers, a village teacher cannot leave it all, vent frustrations to an uninvolved party, and return the next morning with a different perspective.

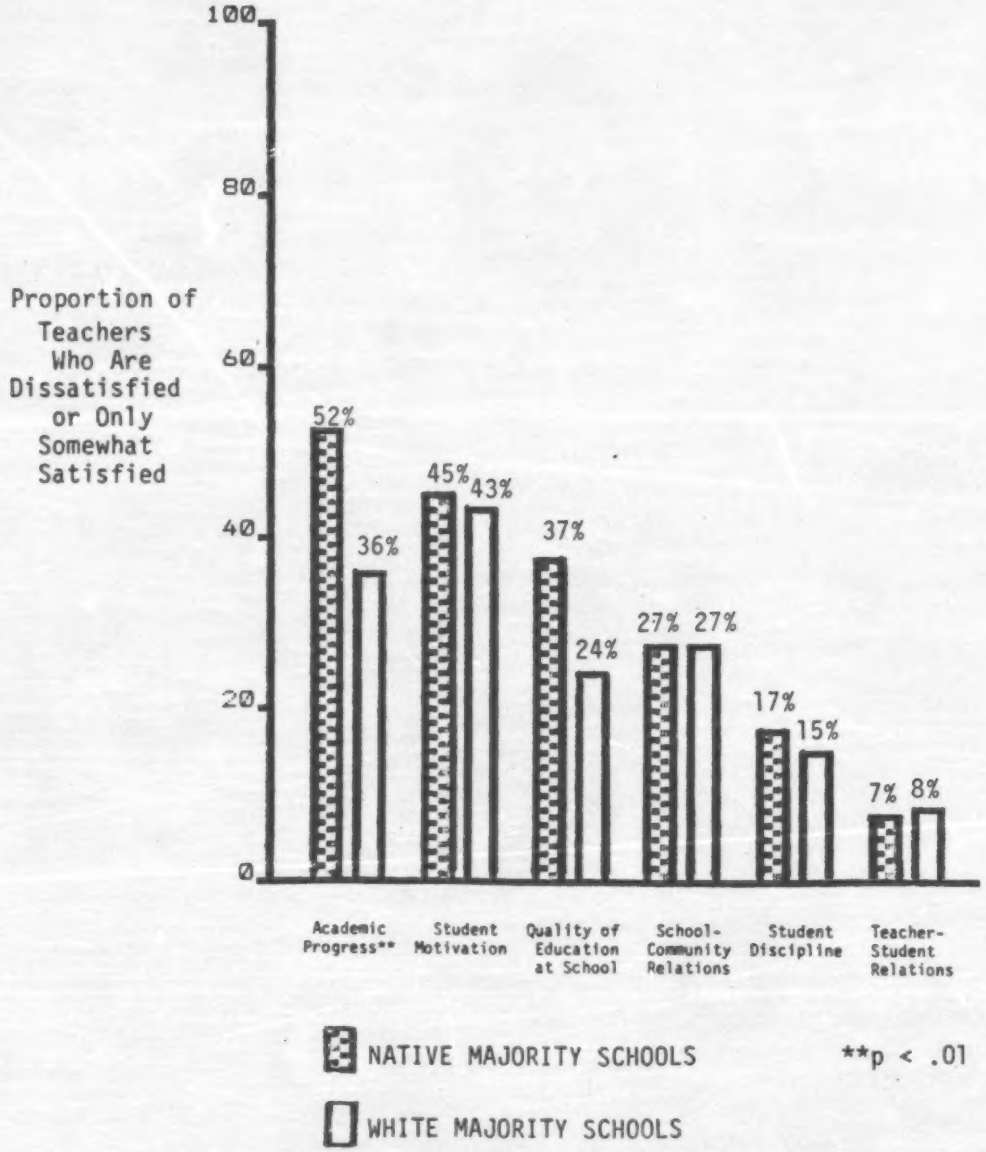
Rural Teachers' Satisfaction With Educational Conditions

Most rural teachers (63 percent) were satisfied with the general quality of education at their school (Table 10). Teachers with more experience in rural Alaska education were significantly more satisfied. Of teachers who had five years or more experience, for example, 79 percent were very or mostly satisfied with the general quality of education.

When we asked teachers more specifically about academic progress, however, less than half the teachers were satisfied. More experienced teachers were not significantly more satisfied than those new to rural Alaska education. Teachers saw a key problem as motivation, not discipline or teacher-student relationships (Table 10).

TABLE 10

TEACHER SATISFACTION WITH EDUCATIONAL CONDITIONS:
NATIVE MAJORITY SCHOOLS AND WHITE MAJORITY SCHOOLS



SOURCE: McBeath, G., Kleinfeld, J., McDiarmid, G., and Coon, D. A Statewide Survey of Rural Alaska School Teachers, Fairbanks, AK: Center for Cross-Cultural Studies, University of Alaska, 1982.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE RURAL EFFECTIVE SCHOOLS PROJECT

In attempting to change schools, it is critical to begin with what teachers see as problems. It is important, therefore, to know that many rural teachers do see students' academic progress--the typical focus of statewide effective schooling projects--as a serious issue. Rural teachers may well be receptive to a project aimed at assisting them to increase students' academic skills. The majority of teachers are satisfied, in contrast, with the general quality of education in their school. A project that appears to teachers to be based on the assumption that rural schools are somehow "failing" will be unattractive.

Rural Alaska teachers are not likely, however, to be receptive to the instructional practices that national research has found to be important in raising achievement among low income children. Most of these practices are not used often in rural schools. Nor are these the practices that come to mind when teachers think about what really works in rural classrooms.

The majority of teachers in Native majority communities, in contrast, do use often some of the instructional practices that research has linked to the effective education of Native American education--Native teacher aides, self-paced instruction, using local examples to illustrate academic concepts. When we asked teachers what worked in their own classrooms, they mentioned these kinds of practices, not the practices emphasized in the national research literature.

The Rural Effective Schools Project should point out to teachers that there is no necessary contradiction between the national research on effective schooling and the research on Native American education. (The value of individualized, self-paced instruction is an exception.) The effective schooling

literature focuses in large part at the school level. The Native American education literature focuses primarily at the classroom level. It is not surprising that teachers, concerned with making their classrooms run well and fine tuning their methods, are more interested in the classroom level. Both sets of practices may be important to rural schooling.

In working with teachers to improve small rural schools, there are special opportunities and special pitfalls. An opportunity is that many rural teachers are dissatisfied with what they are offered in the area of professional growth and development. The Rural Effective Schooling Project may be able to provide professional assistance that teachers will appreciate. Another advantage is that rural principals, particularly in small schools, are already active in instruction. Many principals are principal-teachers and plan, coordinate, and evaluate the instructional program. Rural principals are strategically placed to become instructional leaders.

In working with village schools, however, the Rural Effective Schools Project should be aware of the tensions that exist between many village schools and the central office. The Project should carefully develop independent support at both the school and central office levels.

The Rural Effective Schools Project also needs to be aware of rural teachers' sensitivity to what parents want and the feeling of teachers in some communities that parents do not expect their children to go on to college. The issue of what should count as high expectations and academic success in a culturally different village school warrants discussion. This is an issue that cannot be appropriately considered without the participation of village parents. Above all, the Rural Effective Schools project needs to gain the active support of parents for efforts to improve rural schools.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Many reviews of the literature on effective schooling practices have been published in the national literature. This paper refers primarily to the literature reviews conducted by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. These reviews were commissioned by the Governor's Task Force on Effective Schooling and form the research base most discussed in Alaska.

[2] This survey was done in the spring of 1982. More computers have been introduced to rural school since this time. How often they are used, however, is another question.

[3] We used the set of questions developed by Brookover et al. (1979) to measure academic expectations. Brookover found these items to be highly related to achievement in Michigan schools enrolling low income black and white children. We made minor modifications of these items to make them more appropriate for rural Alaska.

[4] Our survey question on what instructional practices the teacher personally found effective came after the survey questions asking whether the teacher used the practices described in the national literature or the literature on Native American education. We asked teachers to draw either from these lists or elsewhere in describing what they personally found effective.

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